

Jan Tumlir. Review. *Artforum* (April 2008), p. 278 – 279.

Jeffrey Vallance

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

If Los Angeles were Paris, Jeffrey Vallance would surely be declared a national treasure, yet I'm convinced that any such public recognition of his peculiar genius would serve only to puncture it. That this exhibition was held at Margo Leavin Gallery reflects a recent uptick in this

artist's stock, no doubt a delayed reaction to his increasing influence abroad. Vallance's favorable reception at last year's Basel Art Fair was only the latest sign of the cultlike favor he has found in Europe. However, a truly triumphant return may have to wait a while longer. Though Vallance's abiding fondness for every conceivable sort of non-art visual production—from comic books to scrap-craft and model making—was ennobled by the context, his oeuvre remained nevertheless shrouded in benign neglect.

The exhibition was divided into two main sections, one comprising a multipart work of mail art from 1978 and the other a more recent selection of "Reliquary Chapels," 2003–. The mail-art piece was initiated by a letter that Vallance wrote to every US senator requesting each to send him a work of art of his or her own making. Many of the written responses are touchingly apologetic, talking up the general importance of the arts while admitting to a lack of talent. Due to the "conceptual" nature of the project, however, such evasions are no less meaningful than the odd assortment of patriotic kitsch furnished with radiant sun torturing misshapen cacti and picture-postcard views of civic architecture at once bland and sinister are a couple of the most egregious examples. As is typical with Vallance, this work couches profoundly distressing insights in throwaway humor and, paradoxically, derives its considerable power as art from the evident powerlessness of art that it might be said to demonstrate. As it stands, *Drawings and Statements by US Senators*, 1978, documents the utter absence of art from political life in America.

As if to round out a church/state analogy, the rest of the exhibition was given over to a ubiquitous motif within Vallance's oeuvre: the devotional shrine. A holdover from his Lutheran upbringing, these display cases have been emptied of their traditional iconography in favor of a range of fascinations that the artist has nurtured over the years. In place of the Virgin Mary, for instance, we are asked to consider the beatitude of Connie Chung, an anchorperson with whom he was infatuated throughout the 1980s. *Blinky Bone*, 2006, meanwhile, is a relic of the martyrdom of "Blinky, the Friendly Hen," a shrink-wrapped supermarket fowl that the artist, in perhaps his best-known stunt, subjected to a proper Catholic burial and then disinterred.

These works mix found and handmade elements in a way that leaves their status as art very much in question. A sketch by the artist will be surrounded by store-bought stickers and buttons, for example, and not to suggest discrepancy so much as equivalence; everything is so tidy and cute. If his closest colleagues, Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, are separated from their low-pop fascinations by only the finest line, Vallance may have erased that line entirely. He has refined a manifestly *friendly*, cartoonish style. Even his likenesses of political figures—there are several here of former President Carter—are marked by the soft contours of children's book illustrations, seemingly purged of any tendency toward cruel caricature. As Vallance modestly enacts a succession of increasingly ostentatious roles, from national ambassador to shaman, one is struck above all by one's own diminished expectations as to what art can actually do. An air of delusion and infantilism hangs

Jeffrey Vallance, *Coral in the Shape of Connie Chung*, 2006, mixed media, 13 3/4 x 11 1/2 x 5 1/2".



heavy over these proceedings, but doesn't quite counter the weird atavistic hopefulness of it all. An art-world variant on the edict The meek shall inherit the earth, Vallance's work is most effective when it gets beneath what it aims to overcome.

—Jan Tumlir